

Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
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1. Pheasant Hunting in Iowa is Part of Thanksgiving Tradition
2. Youth Deer Hunt – by Joe Wilkinson
3. Songbird Tagging and Preparing for Deer Season – by Joe Wilkinson
4. ‘Goldfinch’ License Plate Can Now Fund *Goldfinches*
5. Forested Riparian Buffers Improve Water Quality and Profit Landowners

PHEASANT HUNTING IN IOWA IS PART OF THANKSGIVING TRADITION

DES MOINES – The Thanksgiving tradition means more than just a big meal with family. In many homes, it means heading out to hunt Iowa’s number one game – the ringneck pheasant.

“Thanksgiving is the second busiest weekend for pheasant hunting and we will have a lot of hunters going out for the first time,” said Rod Slings, recreation safety program supervisor with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). “These hunters need to know the new blaze orange requirement for hunting upland game birds - pheasants, roughed grouse, quail, Hungarian partridge and woodcock.”

Hunters can fulfill the new blaze orange requirement by wearing a hat, cap, vest coat, jacket, sweatshirt, sweater, shirt or coveralls that are at least 50 percent solid blaze orange. Slings encouraged hunters to talk about safety while sitting around and discussing the hunt.

“The goal of every hunt is to enjoy the experience with your fellow hunters and to return home safely at the end of the day. Think about who you hunt with. It’s your friends and family. Hunting in a safe manner should be at the top of the pre-hunt checklist,” Slings said. “Make a hunting plan outlining everyone’s role, where you will be hunting, and when you will return. Plan the hunt, and hunt the plan.”

Slings said shooting outside the zone of fire and swinging on a flushing rooster are two major sources of pheasant hunting injuries.

“It can be pretty exciting when a rooster bursts out with their cackle. It is an exciting time, but hunters need to keep their emotions in check,” he said.

So far, the DNR has investigated one hunting related injury during the 2004 pheasant season.

For more information, contact Slings at 515-281-8652 or you local conservation officer.

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YOUTH DEER HUNT

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Ahead of us, we could see the slope drop off into the creek bed, 100 feet below. It seemed like a natural funnel for deer moving from the east side of these tree-lined hillsides to the west. Or vice versa. The plan was to find a tree, set up alongside it, and see if it would offer a shot.

As we walked in, a solid shot sounded to the north. First deer down already? But shotguns? In November? No, we weren't jumping the proverbial gun. For 20 young hunters, the gun season at Springbrook State Park and the Department of Natural Resources Education Center was underway.

Nathan Namanny and Al Foster would set up a couple hundred yards over the hill from the Education Center campus; Nathan as the hunter...Al as his mentor. I was tagging along to see how this first of its kind youth education hunt would develop. Right away, I could see a problem. The deer got there ahead of us!

Through the oaks, hickories and ironwoods ahead of us, a nice eight-point buck sprinted after a doe. Though on the backside of the *peak* of the rut, we still expected some activity; hopeful it would increase the deer traffic. The buck, three does and a confused 'spike' buck played out a Keystone Kops caper in front of us. When the show was over, we slid behind a tree trunk and deadfall. But they'd be back.

Spread throughout the 886 acres in Guthrie County, each hunter and mentor had staked out a spot. Coming from St. Ansgar to Des Moines, from Denison to Eldora, they had a couple things in common. They had never shot a deer. They were between 12 and 15 years old. And each had completed the hunter education course. This would not be a traditional Iowa party hunt with drives. With a pretty high deer population in the park,

the hunting duos were advised to find a good spot; a trail crossing, a funnel area and to sit tight. “Pay attention to the wind direction,” advised ‘huntmaster’ A. Jay Winter, a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) training officer. “If you don’t move and they can’t smell you, they will not be too alarmed.”

That’s what 13-year-old Mitchell Butler of St. Ansgar learned, moments after he began his trek back into the woods. “It just started walking away,” he said of the button buck ahead of him. “Then it stopped. We walked closer but it didn’t run. I shot and hit him...it was a good shot.” From Des Moines, 15-year-old Michael Shultz had a similar story. “I was 30 yards away. I walked up to it, ten yards closer and then I shot.” Shultz and his dad, Rick, hauled out a nice doe.

Others, though, learned that those ‘park deer’ that stare from the roadside, as you watch from your vehicle, wise up in a hurry when you step into the woods. Back on our steep slope, Nathan passed up a couple shots when a suspicious doe (no antlered deer could be taken in this youth hunt) stopped too far away from us and too close to the ravine edge. An errant shot would sail a couple hundred yards into ‘who knows where.’ Besides the prior hunter education class, the youth hunters and mentors had gone through several additional sessions specific to deer and deer hunting.

“(Many) hunters have that mind set, ‘I gotta get my deer; We gotta fill our tags.’ They take it way too seriously,” advised DNR Conservation officer George Hemmen at one of the sessions. “If you can shake that attitude, you’ll probably never have a problem with a conservation officer.”

Nathan closed his first day with a missed shot, creasing a tree instead of the deer. By noon the next day, though, he and Foster were field dressing a doe and dragging it straight up that same steep hillside. The rest of the afternoon, he was anxious to talk about how they were in the right spot as it came running up the hill; how he dropped it with one shot. But he was enthusiastic about the rest of the weekend, too. “Coming out here in the early morning; scaring a turkey off its roost was kind of fun. We saw a fox, all sorts of different animals. We learned about processing deer, following a blood trail.”

And that’s what organizers hoped to instill in these future hunters. “It is to introduce youths to the outdoors; to give them a positive first experience,” said Winter. “We’ve had smiles and stories from them. Listening to the mentors and the kids has been terrific”

Sidebar: Before the Hunt

Before the young hunter stepped into the woods, they had been schooled on safety and deer hunting strategy. The park and education center were divided into four units for hunting. A fifth area, around the hub of activities, was designated off limits.

At the gun range, each ‘sighted in’ his or her shotgun. Marshall Wissink had been a bit high, then a bit low, on his first two shots. The third slug hit dead center. “I just

aimed at the bottom of the orange box on my sights,” he noted. The Des Moines youth got his deer late in the day on Saturday. Krista Statler of Ankeny, one of two girls in the hunt, was consistent but a couple inches off center. “It kept coming over to the right and a little under,” she said, looking at her paper target. Her adjustment? “I have to aim higher and a little bit to the left, correct?” It worked. She dropped her deer late in the day on Sunday.

Hunters and their mentors also learned the basics of deer in Iowa; how hunting seasons and limits are established, the emphasis on taking antlerless deer this year and other management points. They also strapped themselves into tree-stand harnesses, followed blood trails and watched an experienced hunter field dressing a just-arrived road-killed deer.

Besides a \$26 deer tag, each hunter paid \$100 for the weekend to cover food, lodging and other expenses for him or her and the mentor. About half the participants were sponsored by a local Pheasants Forever chapter or other conservation organization. Winter, from the DNR, is shaping plans for a 2005 education hunt. Details should be available by midwinter.

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SONGBIRD TAGGING AND PREPARING FOR DEER SEASON

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

A flash of color zipped across the scene at the feeders, only to bounce and stick. Another downy woodpecker caught in the nearly invisible net. Or maybe it was a goldfinch this time...or a chickadee. A nuthatch, perhaps?

They were all showing up as Rob Bradley extricated the indignant balls of feathers, during his November bird banding session in rural Linn County. With a federal banding license, he looks for trends in the banded birds. “One seems to be longevity,” Bradley offers, of a couple locations that have had steady winter birdseed and suet available over the years. “It seems to make a difference with feeders up here. Birds that normally live about three years; we are finding some who live up to around seven years.”

That data comes from songbirds caught, fitted with tiny bands, released and then recaptured in ensuing years. It is not uncommon to come up with a local recapture; a bird banded there in previous years (or days!), as it leans on that human-provided handout as one of its winter food sources. “The biggest thing (now) is juncos. They come down here from the north and they’ll stay until April,” says Bradley. “Sometimes we get pine siskins and others. There is a red-breasted nuthatch that was here at the feeder earlier. We haven’t caught him yet.”

Bradley has banded 35,000 birds over the years, with 33 ‘returns,’ from birders in other locations who have found birds he has banded. Working this day from the Wickiup Hill Learning Area, near Cedar Rapids, he demonstrated for Cub Scouts and families visiting the county conservation center. That meant a little hands-on birding experience as they watched him clip the tiny bands to toothpick-thin avian legs while talking about habits and features of each bird. He always draws a collective ‘ooooohhh,’ as he shows them the tongue of the woodpecker, for instance, about one-third as long as the bird itself.

The family outings also provide willing volunteers to release the birds...after a careful lesson on holding them correctly. “When you hold them, their beaks are moving around. Their claws cling to your fingers,” assesses Cub Scout Andrew Laing of Cedar Rapids. “When you let them go, it’s like having a paintbrush with feathers on it, just whishing by your hand, it’s so smooth.” His favorite bird to release? “An eagle. That would be pretty neat; holding it in your arms and letting it go,” answered Laing---hypothetically, of course. Otherwise? “The woodpeckers. Their heads are soft when they turn into your hand.”

Sight It In Now, Or Regret It Later

With the days ticking away towards Iowa’s shotgun deer seasons, there’s always plenty for hunters to do before they step into the field. Ahead of scouting, securing landowner permission and checking clothes, supplies and equipment before the December hunt, a critical aspect is often overlooked.

“The one thing that should increase your odds, is sighting in your gun before the season,” offers Willy Suchy, deer research biologist with the Department of Natural Resources. “Make sure you understand where it shoots and become familiar with how it operates.”

A misplaced shot can be the difference between a buck in the truck, or watching that rack and flagging white tail disappear over a hill. It also can mean a frustrating and time-consuming search for a deer that doesn’t go down right away from a clean shot. By spending 15 or 30 minutes on a shooting range, you can adjust your sights or scope to close in on ‘dead center’ on your target. Many experts remind you to use the same slugs you will be using on opening day, and to confirm your groupings from a couple different distances. With some slugs running up to \$10 or more for a box of five, there’s a temptation to skimp at the shooting bench. Noting all the time and effort you spend in the field, though, Suchy suggests spending the few extra dollars and minutes, rather than watching a trophy buck—or any deer—bolt out of range because you were not prepared.

At the Hawkeye Wildlife Area in northwest Johnson County, the 25-yard and 100-yard shooting ranges are now open, just north of the upper Coralville Reservoir. Excavation work will continue on the 50-yard range, as schedules allow. Wildlife crews have built and installed concrete tubes and ten shooting benches at the 100-yard range and will have three benches on the shorter range. The range—1.8 miles west of the Hawkeye Area shop on Amana Road NW--is at the site of the former shooting ‘pit.’

The aptly named ‘pit’ used to resemble a landfill, with junked appliances, boxes and furniture dumped as ‘targets’. No more. “Patrols are increased in the area, to catch people dumping,” cautions wildlife area manager Dennis Procter. “Regulations are posted right there on a sign. There is a fence across the front. In the future, the whole area will be fenced. It is *not* a dumping ground.”

Through December 9 (the close of duck season in the northern zone), shooting hours are 11 a.m. until sunset. After that date, the range will open at sunrise. The new range is for firearms, shooting single projectiles only. Less than a mile to the west, the 12 station shotgun range has been open since last year. Clay bird enthusiasts and others using shotguns with *shot*, not slugs, are to use that area.

DNR officials estimate the final price tag of the renovated shooting area at \$100,000. Donations are still being accepted (contact Procter at 319-857-4645 or DNR wildlife biologist Tim Thompson at 319-354-8343). Procter said a \$3,000 contribution came in just this week from the Swisher Men’s Club.

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‘GOLDFINCH’ LICENSE PLATE CAN NOW FUND *GOLDFINCHES*

Beginning in January, money from the natural resources license plate, which features the state bird (goldfinch) on the state flower (wild rose), can actually be used to fund goldfinches, and more than 500 other ‘non-game’ species of wildlife under the banner of DNR’s Wildlife Diversity Program.

In prior years, money from sales and renewals of this popular specialty plate was dedicated solely to the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) fund for city, county and state parks, historical and water quality projects, and habitat activities, according to Doug Harr, DNR’s wildlife diversity coordinator. It was not directly available to help nongame wildlife, like the goldfinch, bald eagle, ornate box turtle, and other species that not pursued by hunters or anglers.

“We know that in the past some people decided not to purchase a natural resources plate when they learned funding was not directed to the Wildlife Diversity Program, as it is in other states. But the legislature last spring changed the law to increase the cost of the plate and pass along the increased revenue to the Wildlife Diversity Program,” Harr said. He added that the original cost of the plate -- \$35 to buy one and \$10 a year to renew it -- still goes to REAP. After January, the plate costs goes to \$45 to buy it, and \$25 a year to renew. The differences in those costs go to Wildlife Diversity.

Harr said the change should encourage many more thousands of Iowans to sport the attractive specialty plate. To purchase it, he said that motorists need to take their old

plates and registration to their county treasurer. Treasurers will send their annual renewal notices after that. He also said the plate makes an easy Christmas present by going on-line at www.getyourtags.com for a gift application form. The same web site can be used to renew plates, as well.

As a result of the new funding for the Wildlife Diversity Program, Harr listed a number of project examples that might be considered by the DNR: better habitat protection for specially designated Bird Conservation Areas; basic surveys or monitoring of such creatures as wood turtles, spotted skunks, and Ozark minnows; special publications about songbirds and other creatures; and restoring prairies on existing public lands for rare prairie-chickens and smooth green snakes.

Most of the new funding will be used to match federal grants available to states for helping wildlife “species of greatest conservation need.” Harr added that a new Iowa *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Plan*, identifying wildlife in jeopardy and helping focus these critical conservation dollars, currently is under development.

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FORESTED RIPARIAN BUFFERS IMPROVE WATER QUALITY AND PROFIT LANDOWNERS

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a tool to improve Iowa’s water quality by planting forested riparian buffers, which is a fancy name for strips of trees and grasses along streams.

Throughout Iowa, natural grass and tree buffers that would normally filter water flowing into streams have been removed to create additional cropland. Farming next to the stream creates a direct route for pollutants to reach streams and rivers. Riparian buffers put natural vegetation back on the landscape to filter out soil sediment, fertilizer, manure and herbicides. Planting trees and shrubs also improves Iowa’s wildlife habitat and natural beauty.

The riparian buffer practice involves planting a 180-foot wide area with trees and grasses along each side of a stream bank. Buffers planted on cropland must contain a minimum of 60 feet of trees or shrubs. The other 120 feet could be planted to native grasses. The entire buffer could be trees and shrubs if desired. Buffers on marginal pastureland must be a minimum of 160 feet trees and shrubs.

Water quality and wildlife are big winners in this program; however, landowners can also win by using buffers to increase their income. The program will reimburse landowners 90 percent of the planting costs. Landowners can also receive a \$150 per acre sign up bonus and an annual rental payment for 15 years. If the buffer is on pasture the payment will be \$84 per acre annually. If the buffer is on cropland the rental rate

will depend on the average soil rental rates for the soil type on which the buffer is planted. The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office can determine your soil rental rate.

The riparian buffer program is a continuous sign-up practice. Landowners can apply anytime at their county NRCS or Farm Service Agency (FSA) office. Any crop or pasture land adjacent to a creek, stream or river qualifies for the program.

For more information on forested riparian buffers go to www.iowatreeplanting.com or contact, Paul Tauke, supervisor with the DNR forestry bureau, at 515-242-6898 or paul.tauke@dnr.state.ia.us.

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